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C O N F I D E N T I A L KABUL 002426

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STATE FOR SCA/A AND USAID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/22/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: DEPUTY MINISTER SAIKAL DISCUSSES THE STRATEGIC
PARTNERSHIP

REF: STATE 62432

Classified By: Political Counselor Angus Simmons for reasons 1.4 B & D

¶1. (C) Summary: Deputy Foreign Minister Saikal told PolCouns in a May 21 meeting that the GOA was pleased with the first March 2006 Strategic Partnership dialogue in Washington and hoped to move to substance and outcome in succeeding meetings. He stated that reftel outline for the March dialogue represents an "authentic" summation of the results and next steps agreed on at the Washington meeting. Saikal suggested both sides develop a matrix breaking down the key issues and develop timelines and benchmarks for each item, delineating the lead country, government agency and POC for each point. Regarding the text of the last meeting, Saikal focused on three key areas: (1) regional cooperation (especially security, energy, borders, infrastructure and counternarcotics, (2) capacity building in Afghanistan and (3) reconstruction opportunity zones (ROZs)). The GOA would prefer the next meeting in Kabul be held in early or mid-November, to avoid UNGA, Ramadan and Eid holiday conflicts. The Deputy Minister raised the issue of the delegation composition, and stated, that, though the Afghan side was generally happy with the level of representation, it would be desirable if Secretary Rice could attend, or at least visit Afghanistan around the time of the dialogue; barring that, they indicated Foreign Minister Spanta would be in the U.S. July 4-9 and available to meet with the Secretary July 6, 7 or 8. In closing, Saikal suggested that in order for the MFA to move ahead in the Partnership, they required assistance in capacity building, and specifically with hiring a U.S. desk officer for economic issues. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PolCouns met May 21 with Deputy Foreign Minister Saikal to discuss the Afghan-U.S. Strategic Partnership. Saikal thought a matrix clearly delineating responsibilities of each side and the agency taking the lead on each item would be helpful. The most important issues for the GOA were regional cooperation broadly defined, capacity building and ROZs. Regarding possible dates for the next meeting in Kabul, Saikal suggested the first week of November, but said mid-November would be acceptable if arriving after the U.S. elections would be easier. The Afghan side would like Secretary Rice's attendance or a visit close to the next

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meeting date. If she is not able to attend the next dialogue, Foreign Minister Spanta would like to meet with her July 6-8, during his July 4-9 trip to the U.S. Saikal also

provided PolCouns with an organigram of the Economic and International Organization side of the MFA and suggested the U.S. help find and fund the U.S. desk officer he hopes to hire in the near future (He is likely thinking of an expat Afghan.)

Matrix and Mechanism

13. (C) Saikal agreed with the U.S. readout of the Washington meeting (reftel). In addressing how to proceed, Saikal suggested developing a matrix clearly delineating key issues and which country and government agency would be responsible for follow-up action. Concomitant with the matrix, would be a timeline for each benchmark identified. He also suggested the creation of a special coordination and cooperation mechanism to maintain the matrix and communicate with the POC for each benchmark in the matrix. This mechanism would track the Partnership's successes, ensure the relationship moved in the right direction and suggest next steps. (Comment: Saikal did not go into detail on how his proposed tracking scheme would overlap or align with related benchmarks in the Afghan Compact. An elaborate scheme that duplicates existing mechanisms will be a waste of everyone's time. End Comment.)

Key Issues for Afghans

14. (C) The key issues or foci for the GOA on the Strategic Partnership are regional cooperation, capacity building in Afghanistan and the reconstruction opportunity zones (ROZs). Saikal defined regional cooperation very broadly, covering: security, energy, border management, infrastructure and counternarcotics. He placed special emphasis on capacity building, saying that Afghanistan cannot work on viable power agreements or other areas of cooperation without competent

persons working these issues. He called capacity building extremely urgent and crucial to achieving broader goals, perhaps foreshadowing his later request for assistance in finding an expert for his American Economic desk. Finally, Saikal said the GOA was very interested in the ROZ concept, but added that the current relationship with Pakistan needed to be considered before moving ahead with the concept. Not surprisingly, in the GOA's view, the ROZs should all be located inside Afghanistan, not Pakistan. The idea that they might at least partially be in Pakistan is not part of the MFA's thinking.

The Next Meeting

15. (C) Saikal asked that we begin to think about the composition of the delegations for the next meeting. They noted that Afghanistan was pleased with the U.S. representation in the previous meeting, especially in the working groups. However, he noted that Secretary Rice's participation would have been desirable. The Afghans would appreciate it if Secretary Rice could visit Afghanistan around the time of the next meeting. If her visit cannot be worked out, FM Spanta could meet her on July 6, 7 or 8 during his upcoming July 4-9 visit to the U.S.

16. (C) Saikal proposed the first week of November as an ideal time for the next dialogue. PolCouns indicated U.S. mid term elections would be held then, and Saikal then mentioned mid-November as a possibility. September would be hard for the Afghans due to UNGA, followed by Ramadan and Eid in October.

A Request for a U.S. Expert

17. (C) Saikal closed the discussion with a plea for U.S. assistance in locating a skilled expert in American economic and USAID policy to staff his newly created America Desk for bilateral economic relations. He expressed concern that he could not find a qualified Afghan or, at least, one who would

work for the 8,000 Afghanis he could pay. He suggested the U.S. fund this officer's salary. He requested that the USG consider funding an advisor or qualified person to work at the MFA to help increase the Ministry's capacity to handle this wide array of issues. (Comment: The GOA is still in the early days of its thinking on the next round of the Strategic Partnership. Once we have nailed down dates, we will be able to work on participation and the substantive aspects of the agenda in a purposeful way. End Comment.)
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